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ABSTRACT

Concern about the preparation and competence of teachers has brought about a rapid spread of teacher competency assessment programs. Currently, 36 states test or plan to test teachers prior to certification. Two states, Arkansas and Texas, are already involved with testing teachers in service. Teacher competency testing has become embroiled in state and national politics, and has also become involved in charges of racism and anti-affirmative action. Even though teacher shortages promise to become more severe in the future, several states have exacerbated these shortages by requiring competency tests for teacher certification. Furthermore, while the competency tests produce shortages that result in suboptional instruction for pupils, they provide no incentive for highly qualified people to enter or stay in the teaching profession. While the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) support, to varying degrees, teacher competency testing prior to certification, neither organization supports testing of veteran teachers. Research indicates that there is no test that can predict who will be a good teacher. (CB)

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TEACHER TESTING: I'M O.K., YOU'RE O.K., BUT SOMEBODY'S NOT!

by Dawn Vincent Martin

A Gallup Poll taken in the spring of 1984 discovered that 89 percent of the public favored competency tests for teachers.[1]

The public's concern about the preparation of teachers has brought about a rapid spread of teacher competency assessment programs. Currently 36 states test or plan to test prior to certification; 28 states test or plan to test prior to certification; 21 states test or plan to test application for admission to teacher education.[2] Two states, Arkansas and Texas, are already involved with testing teachers in service, although this is being legally challenged by teachers. Another state, Georgia, will soon be testing all teachers in service except those with lifetime certificates.[3]

What is somewhat surprising about the national trend for teacher competency testing is the apparent conviction of the public that there are so many incompetent teachers. Also surprising is the rush to use standardized tests when these were under attack through most of the sixties and early seventies.

Teacher competency testing has become embroiled in state and national politics and has also become involved in charges of racism and anti-affirmative action. For many blacks, teacher testing is, as a Florida headline put it, an "academic electric chair" that could quickly make black teachers a vanishing breed.[4]

Much of the racial allegations against teacher testing concerned the southern half of the U.S. In 1961 the Florida legislature passed legislation mandating all teachers to score at least 500 on the National Teachers Examination, In 1968 as a result of the efforts of local and state teacher organizations and the N.E.A. the law was repealed.

In the 1970s use of the N.T.E. came under fire in North and South Carolina, but the Supreme Court defused this by upholding the use of the N.T.E.

The state-level teacher testing movement started with the Louisiana Acts of 1977 and have since spread to other southern states. In 1978 Florida and Georgia began to develop similar programs. In 1979 Alabama, Arizona, Kansas, Massachusetts, South Carolina and Tennessee developed testing programs. Five more states did so in 1980 and six more in 1981.

During six administrations of Florida's Certification Exam 80 to 90 percent of the whites passed compared to 32 to 37 percent of the blacks. Other southern states such as Alabama and Mississippi confirm similar trends. For this reason many blacks see competency tests as a punitive device to designate them as the "not O.K." individuals to be removed from the teaching profession.[5]

Even though we are experiencing teacher shortages that promise to become severe, a number of states have exacerbated these shortages by requiring competency tests for teacher certification. Competency testing in various states has reduced the supply of teachers from 10 to 50 percent in different years.[6] Although these tests are meant to screen out incompetent teachers, studies have not found any consistent relationship between scores on teacher competency tests and measures of teacher performance in the classroom.[7,8,9] This should not be surprising

since the act of test-taking is different from the act of teaching. Further, many of the test questions on the National Teacher Examination, for example, have nothing to do with the application of pedagogical principles to diverse classroom situations.

Most important, while the competency tests produce shortages that result in suboptional instruction for pupils, they provide no incentive for highly qualified people to enter and stay in the teaching profession. Few school districts and states have raised salaries high enough to attract more talented people to the profession.

The American Federation of Teachers supports testing teacher candidates. A.F.T. points out that one must pass a test to be a lawyer, a doctor, an insurance salesman, or even an automobile driver. The larger teacher's organization, the National Education Association, has been more skeptical of teacher testing, believing that existing state certification laws and the tenure period are sufficient tools for rooting out incompetency.[10] Recently there has been a softening of this position within the N.E.A. and there appears to be some support for testing if not used as a primary requirement for entry into the profession.

The idea of testing veteran teachers in service is opposed by both the N.E.A. and the A.F.T. These organizations believe this procedure could be abused by unethical administrators wishing to punish "not O.K." teachers who rock the boat. It could also be used to designate high-priced teachers as "not O.K." in order to hire less expensive novices.

Proposals for when to administer tests to teachers have ranged from administration prior to acceptance in school of education, to administration prior to graduation, to administration prior to hiring by the school district, and, as in Arkansas, Texas and Georgia, to administration of

tests to teachers already in service. A growing number of states require an internship or beginning teacher year with appropriate assessment before initial certification can be awarded.

In Ohio the state plans to take action on teacher testing by 1987, but one organization has already solved the problem to its own satisfaction. The Ohio Council for Excellence in Teaching represents 60 school districts who are concerned with the calibre of some teacher education graduates. These districts are using a standardized test to screen applicants for teaching positions. To even be granted an interview in these districts the applicant must first pass the standardized test. Other school districts in Ohio seem to be waiting to see what the state will do with projected revisions in teacher certification standards.

Perhaps the most controversial use of testing of teacher applicants has been implemented in New Jersey together with an alternative route to teacher certification. The state board of education adopted the plan in September of 1984, thus revolutionizing teacher licensing in New Jersey by dropping the century-old reliance on teacher training institutes. The plan also almost entirely replaced the process of emergency certification procedures, giving the state greater control over teacher quality.

The New Jersey program allows any holder of an undergraduate degree to work for at least a year in a public school district after first passing the National Teacher's Examination. During the probation year the candidate receives 80 hours of formal instruction and serves for a month under the direct supervision of an experienced teacher before taking over actual teaching duties. Also during this first year the provisional teacher receives another 120 hours of formal instruction

and is supervised and observed by a support team from the school district. At the end of the year the provisional candidates can, if successful, be recommended for a standard teaching certificate. The new certification plan does not eliminate teacher training programs at the state and private colleges, but does provide them with tough competition.

Across the nation there has been a strong correlation between competency testing of students and competency testing of teachers. Where incompetency is found in students, many conclude, rightly or wrongly, that this implies incompetent teaching. As an example, New Jersey has for a number of years given minimum basic skills tests in reading and mathematics to pupils at grade levels 3, 6, 9 and 11. In one year, 1980, there were over 175 schools that had large numbers of pupils who failed the test. It was not much later that the attention began to focus on the teachers themselves.

And so the search continues for the "not O.K." teacher - in New Jersey and across the nation. Despite the teacher shortage, despite critics who claim a "quick fix," the rush to teacher testing continues unabated. And, yet, it is, perhaps, too soon to describe this phenomenon as a "fait accompli." There will probably be continued litigation on the grounds of racism, violation of affirmative action, violation of individual rights, age bias, and so forth.

The fact that research indicates there is no test that can predict who will be a good teacher seems to make little difference to those who clamor for competency testing of teachers. They point out that doctors, lawyers and other professionals must pass a test to practice.

What is needed is a test that can actually predict teaching effectiveness, and we do not need a separate test for each state. Unfortunately there appears to be a crazy-quilt pattern to the variety of tests that are being used.

Leadership for a single test should probably come from the profession itself, if teachers' organizations can ever collaborate. Having the federal government step in could possibly involve "strings" in terms of allocation of federal funds. The government might even conduct studies to determine which states had the highest and lowest "quality" teachers based on test performance.

It is unlikely that true educational reform will be attained even if there is a valid national test, but it could be a first step to get things going. Next we need to attract gifted people into teaching and compensate them well. We need to reward excellence in teaching in much the same way that industry rewards its outstanding people.

One final observation is in order. There can be little doubt that there is tremendous public pressure to adopt competency testing. Should this occur nationwide it will be interesting to see if this actually relieves the pressure and convinces the public that the problem of incompetent teachers is resolved. Perhaps then the vast majority of competent teachers can get on with educating youth. As one teacher put it: "Teaching is the only job I know of where you can pick up the newspaper on any given day and read about how incompetent you are. I'm sick of that!"

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